

Kulick, Don, 2019, *A Death in the Rainforest: How a Language and a Way of Life Came to and End in Papua New Guinea*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill. 2019. pp275, ISBN 2018047044.

In his foreword, Don Kulick promises to set down the unvarnished truth about his fieldwork experiences of over thirty years in the village of Gapun in Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea. Kulick, a linguistic anthropologist, has recounted the ways that the Tayap language spoken there is ‘...fizzling inexorably to its end’ in several academic books. Here he presents the story for a more general audience.

Anthropological memoirs are a distinct genre of the discipline. Increasingly, since the last decades of the twentieth century as ‘reflexivity’ and ‘positionality’ became standard features of anthropological writing, authors have included details about their relationships, problems and experiences with the subjects of their research. Colin Turnbull’s study of the Ik in *The Mountain People*, gained notoriety for his unsympathetic, even misanthropic representation of a community beset by drought and hunger. Nigel Barley’s *The Innocent Anthropologist* became a bestseller and his comic presentation of his confusions, cultural blunders and affection for the people he studied spoke of a deep humanism to many who had no familiarity with fieldwork. Don Kulick’s book, as the title suggests, is in many ways a lament for the cultural depletion that has occurred in Gapun. But it is also a fascinating account of social change that has parallels in many other Papua New Guinean villages. Unlike many of its predecessors, it draws on a decades-long intellectual and personal trajectory of research and personal engagement in a specific place.

Kulick’s academic studies have consistently concentrated on the demise of vernacular language. In this book he explores the puzzling question with which he began: ‘Why does a language die?’ The death of a language in a remote place is especially intriguing, for there are no immediately apparent pressures to abandon the vernacular. In the towns of Papua New Guinea, where people from diverse places in the country live, the need for a *lingua franca* is obvious and *Tok Pisin* has long provided that means of communication. In places where large economic projects bring together people from all over the country, there is a logic to the loss. But in Gapun, which requires navigating a swamp to reach it, Tok Pisin has become the language of everyday life, the mother tongue. It lacks the rich vocabulary of the local language. The complex world of the rainforest, with local names for plants,

This is the author manuscript accepted for publication and has undergone full peer review but has not been through the copyediting, typesetting, pagination and proofreading process, which may lead to differences between this version and the [Version of Record](#). Please cite this article as [doi: 10.1111/TAJA.12356](https://doi.org/10.1111/TAJA.12356)

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animals and seasonal change is diminished as a generation is rendered incapable of speaking specifically about them.

Kulick's relationships with the people of Gapun were often fraught. His primary language teacher, the grumpy old man Raya, disparages his attempts at ingratiation and is relentlessly critical. But by the end of his fieldwork, the bonds of affection and mutual respect are such that Raya is unable to say goodbye for fear of weeping. Like most anthropologists, Don Kulick is required to participate in the complicated transactions that construct everyday life in a village. As he notes, perhaps cynically, while most researchers are at pains to present the warm glow of fictive kinship that often develops over time, few provide inventories of the things given and received. Kulick provides an inventory of his gifts to villagers and their return gifts, over a week. He confirms my view that having to live on sago must be one of the harshest punishments a fieldworker can endure. He also recounts some alarming and disturbing experiences of violence and callous treatment of people. His truth-telling is often humorous, self-deprecating and extremely funny, but this is balanced by his willingness to describe some aspects of village life that are air-brushed from ethnographies. When reading this book, I felt that aspects of village life that I have encountered many times in Papua New Guinea – events that reveal people's warmth, hospitality and ingenuity – were overwhelmed by the dramatic acts of violence and instances of callousness Kulick describes. He is sympathetic to the child displaced by a new baby and the lovelorn adolescents who write semi-literate letters to their inamorata. His hostess/village mother Sake emerges as a formidable termagant whose reputation for obscene invective is explored as a 'poetics of swearing' in Tayap. But the great strength of the book lies in his detailed accounts of pivotal events that have wrought those changes that have diminished and impoverished the economic, social and cultural life of Gapun.

This is an elegiac book. Often Kulick bravely ventures into territory that might offend Papua New Guineans and anthropologists who want to hear only the good news of cultural resilience, economic resourcefulness and enduring sociality. Cultural loss, the disastrous legacy of colonisation; the erosion of customary activities that generated solidarity; the harsh realities of government neglect and rural poverty in Melanesia, are subjects that need to be acknowledged. They all contribute to the death of a language. But for a full, accessible explanation of the process in Gapun I recommend that all anthropologists read this book.

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